

In Interviews, Female CEOs Say They Don't Expect Much Support — at Home or at Work

Andromachi Athanasopoulou, Amanda Moss-Cowan, Michael Smets, and Timothy Morris

Women who have already made it to the top say that the only person who will get you there is yourself.

While many researchers and observers have examined the structural and other barriers that limit women's progress through the ranks, we wanted to explore a different question: how have the few women who have made it to the very top overcome those barriers? Our aim was to discover how female CEOs explain their own success, and to develop recommendations for supporting women's leadership careers more generally.

We embarked on an in-depth study of the [leadership journey of 12 female CEOs](#), most of whom lead large, global corporations. This was part of [a larger study on the same topic](#), covering a total of 151 global CEOs—12 female and 139 male. According to [Grant Thornton \(2016\)](#), globally, only 9% of women in senior management are CEOs or managing directors. In the G7 just 7% of women in senior management are CEOs, compared to 20% who are HR Directors or 12% who are chief marketing officers. Our sample of female CEOs—8% of the 151 CEOs we interviewed—is representative of this reality.

The following five recommendations emerged from the study as advice to women who want to lead.

Own your ambition

The critical factor in a woman's achieving the top job is taking ownership of her ambition.

This starts with seeing herself as a leader, which is by no means as simple as it sounds. Recognizing the work-life compromises they would have to make and the barriers that they would face meant that our interviewees described themselves as “accepting” rather than “celebrating” their ambitions.

This is critical, because even once a woman has accepted her leadership potential, she may find it difficult to access formal development programs – either through lack of sponsorship or reluctance to self-promote. Our female CEOs described how self-acceptance unlocked their ability to take charge of their own development: seeking out stretch assignments, learning on the job, and learning from the people in their networks.

Don't wait to be asked

Developing the confidence to proactively seek stretch assignments is another important step for women in accepting their potential for promotion.

All the CEOs we interviewed, both male and female, talked about women's typically more careful approach to decision-making. They associated this caution with a lack of confidence that was seen to spill over into women's management of their careers. As one male CEO told us: “I was actually talking with a young woman who was asking me something about an opportunity, I mean I'd never

met her before...we were chatting about career advice and she said, you know, I'm just not sure I have all the skills they're looking for, I don't know if I should, you know, go for that or not. And I said, you know, that's the last thing in the world you should be worried about, don't take yourself out of something before you're even in it."

The female CEOs we interviewed agreed. They felt that men started pushing for promotions much harder and faster than women. As one female CEO said, reflecting on her own experience: "I talked about my own personal big change in my career which happened when I asked for the top job and I think women hesitate to ask, and I've seen that very often." This determination seems to be appreciated in the end. As another CEO stressed: "Life might be a little more difficult for the women, ... but if you are determined, the rest of your environment is gonna be understanding. [...] they will respect and admire what you are doing."

Even more importantly, our CEOs urged women to ask for promotion even before they felt completely ready for the job. This was not just a case of mirroring what they perceived to be successful male behaviour, but about being comfortable with uncertainty: "Comfort is not knowing everything that's ahead of you and enough breadth of experience and processing capability to be able to adapt to me is probably one of the single most important things for a CEO [...] the big challenge with that is you'll only get it and you only know it by throwing yourself in the deep end and having really what a lot of people would term high risk challenges in your career and your life."

In fact, in direct contrast to the interviewees who talked about women's careful decision making, some of the female CEOs we talked to were not just comfortable with risk-taking – they actively enjoyed it.

Take charge of your personal and professional life

The female leaders we spoke to expected little outside support, either at home or in work.

They took charge when confronted with work/family conflicts ("Well you can't be the perfect worker, the perfect wife, the perfect mother, which is the – that's the stress point for lots of women, is that they read in magazines what the perfect mother looks like. [...] So it's, it's about actually working out what you really want to do and be, and actually then working out your trade-offs in that, and some of those are domestic trade-offs."); and, faced with a lack of sponsorship compared with their male peers, they actively developed their own networks, and sought mentors when their organisation did not formally provide such opportunities.

Interestingly, they emphasized trying to develop networks that would help them to do their current job better, rather than to get a better job, which is typically how men employ networks.

Focus on the long-term goal

Both male and female CEOs were well aware of the difficult trade-offs involved with having children. However, the women we interviewed were much more positive than the men about the consequences of stepping out of the workforce, pointing out that missing out on a few years in your career is not critical as long as they plan accordingly ("Take business seriously. You know, you can't "work at times and then not work at other times".)They urged women aiming for leadership positions: "don't give up, don't walk away", that is, take the time off when you need to, go back to

work, and start building your career again from there. Maybe some of your peers will have got ahead of you temporarily, but there is time to catch up.

Organizations can support this long-term outlook by changing HR policies, support mechanisms and leadership development practices to allow women the space and time to manage raising a family, and creating ways for women to remain engaged in the professional and social life of the workplace, even while formally on a reduced workload or leave.

Embrace a well-rounded leadership style

Much has been written about perceived gender differences in leadership styles. Where women are successful, it is thought that they have adopted an androgynous or even masculine leadership style.

Our research calls that into question. There is a strong transformational theme in how our female CEOs lead others. They use nurturing and communicative behaviour, seen as stereotypically feminine, as well as role modelling. However, we found that as part of their self-development they concentrated on developing leadership skills and behaviours that are usually thought of as stereotypically masculine – such as seeing the big picture, developing vision, and honing other strategic capabilities. They treated these as additional and complementary to the stereotypically female transformational style which came most naturally to them. That is, they neither attempted to mimic a “male” leadership style nor presented themselves as “female” leaders, but created a rounded and distinctive blend of leadership skills and behaviours that put the feminine first.

The biggest challenge for women with leadership aspirations remains that first step: recognizing and accepting their own ambition, and being prepared to make the trade-offs that come with it, particularly in terms of work/life balance and having children. In that, they can take heart from the female CEOs we interviewed, who were clear that the challenges, though real, were not insurmountable. However, the men we interviewed continued to see taking time out of the workplace as a concern, and even fretted about the best age for a woman to have children. If this is still the dominant message, then it is no wonder that some potential women leaders are falling at the first fence.

While we hope that research such as ours, combined with steadily growing numbers of female role-models in senior positions, will encourage young women to acknowledge and act on their leadership potential, we believe that there is more that can be done by organisations to support them, particularly at the crucial early stage. This could include a focus on career pacing, supporting networking skills development, planning for longer careers, and facilitating penalty-free career breaks.